Interrogating Your Discipline, and Other Ways Into Anti-Racist Teaching

*By Beth McMurtrie*JULY 02, 2020

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This week:

* I share readers’ responses to a callout on how to talk with students about racism.
* I tell you about a new group focused on Black wellness in academe.
* I point you to advice pieces on how to be a better online teacher.

Supporting Inclusive and Anti-Racist Teaching

When students return to college this fall, they’ll have lived through months of protests and debate about racial injustice and inequality. As I noted in a [recent newsletter](https://www.chronicle.com/article/We-Can-t-Ignore-This/249001), many professors want to address this moment with their students. But if equity, inclusion, and systemic racism are not topics they typically cover in their courses, what should they do?

I spoke to several experts, who gave advice on how faculty members can educate themselves, review their syllabi, examine their teaching styles, and find partners and allies in this work. I also asked readers for advice and ideas on teaching about racism.

This week I’d like to share a few responses from people who have developed creative ways to rethink their teaching, promote diversity and inclusion, and develop support systems for faculty of color.

Building an infrastructure on campus: Valentina Iturbe-LaGrave, director of inclusive teaching practices at the University of Denver, wrote in to describe what she has done on her campus, with a larger point on her mind: Professors who want to dive into the complexities of diversity, race, and inclusion need to prepare for this work. Otherwise, they risk doing more harm than good.

“Instead of ‘teaching about racism,’ I encourage all faculty to teach students how to interrogate their disciplines critically,” she wrote to me. “It could be examining a business-administration course by asking students political questions to consider the connections between plantation politics and the current field, having them listen to the [1619 *New York Times* Podcast](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html). In engineering, it could be an examination of how widely available technologies do not recognize dark skin tones because of the inherent lack of diversity in the discipline.

“My point is, you don't need to make ‘teaching about racism’ an add-on to any course," she continued. "Exploring how it is embedded in the curriculum, what constitutes the ‘canon,’ and who is in the room ensures the conversations traverse students' critical understanding of how race and privilege impact them in real time.”

Iturbe-LaGrave arrived at the university around the 2016 election and met a campus primed, she says, to take a hard look at its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. She ran dozens of workshops and formed faculty-learning communities. She did “deep assessments” of departments to help them figure out why they were losing graduate students of color, and she offered one-on-one sessions for faculty members who wanted to review their courses and their teaching. It’s important to build an infrastructure on campus that supports such work, she says. Otherwise, individual professors — even well-meaning ones — are unprepared for the challenges ahead.

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“The minute you say to faculty, Hey, you should be discussing race and racism, is the minute you have a problem,” Iturbe-LaGrave says. “They will have students who experience this every day. So faculty members better know what they’re saying, how they’re saying it, without doing incredible harm to their students.”

Inclusive teaching is not a quick conversation on the first day of class, but a continuing act. Meanwhile, faculty of color face particular challenges, she notes. Students are more likely to challenge their authority, or see discussions of race in class as an attempt at political indoctrination. She encourages faculty of color to form an association on campus and request funding from the administration.

You can find an extensive resource list on the website of the university's teaching and learning office. It offers advice on [inclusive teaching practices](https://inclusive-teaching.du.edu/) as well as a [teaching toolkit](https://otl.du.edu/du-teaching-toolkit/). Iturbe-LaGrave has also written blog posts on such topics as how to [discuss institutional legacies of racism with students](https://otl.du.edu/pedagogical-strategies-to-acknowledge-and-discuss-institutional-legacies-of-racism/), [respond to trauma in the classroom](https://otl.du.edu/responding-to-trauma-in-the-classroom/), and [teach during the pandemic](https://otl.du.edu/teaching-through-a-pandemic-cognitive-load-mental-health-and-learning-under-stress/).

Redesigning a course assignment: Jenel T. Cavazos, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Oklahoma, wrote in to describe how she had recast one of her courses in light of the events this spring. “I have always taught about prejudice and racism, and I gently confront my primarily 18-year-old, overwhelmingly white population of students with issues of white privilege,” she wrote. “However, I really wanted to do more. Since I’ve got a more or less captive audience of a couple thousand students a year, I think it’s a moral imperative that I use my power and privilege to confront these issues head-on.”

Cavazos decided to replace one of three regular assignments in her introductory psychology course with one focused on race. Because diversity is not one of her areas of expertise, she contacted a friend and colleague, Leslie Berntsen, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Southern California, who is active in teaching and serving on committees related to diversity and inclusion.

The two worked together to come up with something that would meet Cavazos’ criteria, which included being appropriate to a freshman taking a general education course, work that students take ownership of since that leads to deeper learning, and being sensitive to students’ backgrounds, namely white 18-year-olds, many of whom "have grown up in the middle of a very red Bible Belt state,” she wrote. “Research also shows that pushing people too far too fast will actually cause them to double down on their beliefs, so I’m looking to ‘plant a seed.’”

The two decided that students will select from a list of topics related to race and racism, such as maternal death rates, the disproportionate impact of Covid-19, or the lack of diversity among college professors. They will write a letter to someone in power, such as a university president or senator, “describing why the issue is harmful and what can be done to implement change.” To do that, the students will need to research the topic, selecting three or four academic sources to support their position.

“This assignment gives enough flexibility that there should be some topic of interest for nearly everyone, and they get to learn about a variety of real-world current issues in the process,” Cavazos wrote. “In addition, I hope that it helps them be more comfortable advocating for change in the future.”

A New Group to Support Black Academics and Their Allies

After the death of George Floyd, Pearis Bellamy, a doctoral student in counseling psychology at the University of Florida, noticed two distinct reactions among fellow academics. Non-Black colleagues
would send texts or emails of support, asking how they could help. Meanwhile, she and other Black academics were feeling traumatized and exhausted, having spent many hours consoling their families and friends, and attending protests.

So, in collaboration with her adviser, Della V. Mosley, an assistant professor in the counseling-psychology program, Bellamy started [Academics for Black Survival and Wellness](https://www.academics4blacklives.com/), which incorporated a network of professionals in a range of disciplines. Last week the group ran virtual workshops on two tracks. One, designed for non-Black academics, provided anti-racism training and was dedicated to developing plans of action. The other, for Black academics, was designed to build community for healing and support.

The workshops for non-Black faculty members, say Bellamy and Mosley, were focused on accountability, which proved eye-opening for those involved. Some people, for example, said they hadn't realized how much their campuses had depended on Black faculty members to do anti-racism training without providing support or compensation. Participants were expected to complete a lengthy document on how they were going to move forward.

“People have been showing up for that task,” says Mosley. Meanwhile, on the wellness track, Black faculty members appreciated the chance to connect with one another and “be their authentic selves,” she says.

The organization is figuring out next steps. But in the meantime, members have posted [resources](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1PakgQkLLZ5kk6EuUw6F7PKkbGXiEZxyt8Q_Bm1zFZzQ/edit#gid=0) on its website for academics interested in doing their own work on topics such as policing and white privilege.

For non-Black faculty members just beginning this work, Bellamy offers this advice: Reach out to Black-student groups and similar organizations on campus to find out what they want. “Centering Black voices and making sure that you’re trying to respond,” she says, “is always a good first step when thinking about teaching.”

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* Flower Darby, an assistant dean of online and innovative pedagogies at Northern Arizona University and an instructional designer, is writing a series of advice pieces on how to become a better teacher online. You can find her first two pieces [here](https://www.chronicle.com/article/Sorry-Not-Sorry-Online/248993) and [here](https://www.chronicle.com/article/5-Ways-to-Connect-With-Online/249077).
* Rachel Toor, a professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University’s writing program, in Spokane, has [written](https://www.chronicle.com/article/Turns-Out-You-Can-Build/249038) an advice piece on how to build community in a Zoom classroom.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us, at dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beckie.supiano@chronicle.com, or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

—Beth